

## Why Ireland wants the UK to remain in the EU

Lee McGowan

With just over three months to the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, the Brexit debate is intensifying not just across the UK but increasingly making headlines in other EU member states. The issue has resonance for very different audiences across Europe, be they British expatriates living on the Costa Blanca in Spain who are concerned about the implications for their access to the Spanish health system; or be they political leaders, such as Marine Le Pen, who see Brexit as a catalyst for their own desires for a referendum on EU membership in France. Nowhere, however, are concerns of a Brexit so strong and so pronounced than in Ireland. According to Michael Noonan (the Irish Finance Minister), the Irish government is an 'unashamed supporter' of the UK remaining in the EU. <http://www.rte.ie/news/election-2016/2016/0218/768986-campaign-policies-election/>

This view is widely shared within Irish society and certainly by most political parties, a majority of business leaders and by the majority of the public. Worries of a Brexit are real. The concerns over a Brexit are multifaceted and number of issues arise that relate to Ireland's geographical position, its shared history with the UK, existing political relationships, strong cultural ties between the peoples on both islands and worries about the consequences of a Brexit for the Irish economy.

Ireland is not just the UK's closest neighbour but the only one with which the UK shares a 300 mile land border. Moreover, historical connections between both islands run very deep and stretch back at least over 800 years. The relationship between the people in both islands has not always been easy and been marked on occasions by conflict. As Ireland commemorates the centenary of the Easter Rising in 1916 it is worth remembering how fraught political relations between the two states have been since the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. At the core of this tension lay differing views on the status of Northern Ireland. The outworking of the 1990s peace process and the subsequent 1998 Good Friday agreement have really helped to transform the relationships between the UK and the Republic of Ireland and particularly through the creation of a number of cross border institutions to develop cooperation and understanding between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as well as between Dublin and London. Common EU membership has certainly been a factor for facilitating improved relations between both islands. Indeed, European Council summits have offered regular opportunities for both the British and Irish prime ministers to discuss British/Irish relations. Political relations within and between both islands had improved to such an extent that they enabled the historic first ever visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Ireland in 2011. From an Irish perspective the possibility of a Brexit unsettling the current status quo is real as it limits some of the connection points between Ireland and the UK and could according to Enda Kenny, the Irish prime minister, undermine the stability of the peace process itself. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jan/25/northern-ireland-irish-republic-eu-referendum-enda-kenny>

The issue of Northern Ireland stands at the heart of Irish/British relations and concerns about the future state of Irish/Northern Irish relations post Brexit must be factored into any analysis of why Ireland wants the UK to remain in the EU. The shape and nature of the land border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is one of the great unknowns in the Brexit debate. In theory, Brexit implies the creation of a hard border between North and South and the possible return of customs posts and the imposition of tariffs poses issues from companies trading between both parts of the island, disrupts travel and for some may exacerbate feelings of a divided island and a new form of partition.

The situation post Brexit is unclear and the question about the nature of the border needs to be asked and answered. It is a highly sensitive issue. Indeed, will the Common Travel Area between Ireland and the UK (in existence since 1923) remain in place post Brexit? **Much will ultimately depend on how far the other EU26 member states will be willing to allow Ireland some special status in terms of the border with Northern Ireland and free movement of people between both islands.** For Ireland Brexit implies considerable uncertainty, threatens to undermine the existing status quo and to disrupt flows of both people and goods between Ireland and the UK. Today some 500,000 Irish nationals live in Great Britain and are entitled to vote in the referendum. **A visit to Dublin airport on a Monday morning gives a good indication of just how many people are commuting to British cities for work on a weekly basis.** One of the interesting revelations about a Brexit within the UK is the increase in applications from British nationals in the UK (with Irish ancestry and holding British passports) applying for Irish passports. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin there has been a significant rise (some 33%) between 2014 and 2015). Anecdotal evidence suggests that fear of Brexit is behind this trend. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/uk-rush-for-irish-passports-brought-on-by-brexit-fears-1.2560740>

Such cultural and political fears are compounded by concerns over the impact of a Brexit on Ireland's economic fortunes. It is important to stress how closely both economies are linked in terms of trade. Not only does Ireland constitute the UK's seventh largest export market, but the British market has grown in significance over the last two decades for Irish exporters. Now the UK is by some distance Ireland's largest trading partner. Some one third of all Irish imports come from the UK and some 16% of all Irish exports are destined for the UK market. Overall, this two way trade between the islands is estimated to be worth between some £775 million and £1 billion per week. **Arguably one of the biggest challenges from the Irish government's perspective post Brexit centres undoubtedly on the country's future energy supplies as currently some 89% of its oil needs and 93% of its gas imports come from the UK.** Leading business fora such as the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) vocally argue that the UK should remain a member of the EU. Of course, Irish businesses are also weary of a Brexit in case it enables the UK to abandon certain EU regulations and laws to gain some competitive advantage. Much here depends on whether a post Brexit UK wishes to gain access to the single market and become a member of the EEA, but once again uncertainty abounds and has led many businesses such as Ryanair to openly call for the UK to remain in the EU. Nowhere will the outcome of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU be so eagerly anticipated than in Ireland **and arguably the Irish government will be the most nervous observer as the votes are counted and declared.** A vote for Brexit will compel the Irish government to consider how to best manage a new relationship with the UK and especially to maintain and develop its links

with Northern Ireland. Irish diplomacy may be tested in a way that it has never been since Ireland ceased to have British dominion status and became a republic in 1949.